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# INDIAN NOTES

SPRING 1973 • IX NO 2



MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN



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MUSEUM <sup>OF</sup> THE AMERICAN INDIAN

## A COCA CHEWER

This bearded male effigy from the site of Los Esteros is remarkable for its large size and for the surprising amount of paint which has survived. This man is wearing an elaborate headdress. The ornament in his nose is similar to the many gold *narigueras* which have been found in this area, and around his neck is a whale-tooth pendant. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Anton Notey.

Manabí, El Ecuador  
24/462

*circa* 250 B.C.  
10 x 20 inches

## IN THIS ISSUE

The Mikasuki: Personal Observations — 1939-1972	34
Nathan M. Shippee	47
It's a Small World	48
Wounded Knee: Then and Now	50
Board of Trustees	50
Exploring the Enigmatic Tri-point	51

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Diane Amussen, Editor  
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Man and woman near the Celade Cross Mission, Everglades, Florida (photo: Deaconess Harriet M. Bedell, 1933-39)

**THE MIKASUKI**  
Personal Observations — 1939-1972  
**William F. Stiles**  
Curator of Collections  
Museum of the American Indian

While on an archeological survey for the Museum in 1939, I had the opportunity to revisit several Seminole Indian settlements in southern Florida — in the interior and along the Tamiami Trail — inhabited by the Big Cypress or Mikasuki band. Because time was short, my observations centered on those camps along the trail.

When the trail was completed in the 1920s, some families from interior settlements moved there and settled on selected high-ground sites along the canal parallel to the trail — both for convenience and for economic reasons. Indeed, for many, it was the beginning of the end of a self-imposed exile that had begun at the time of the Seminole Wars of 1817-1842. These people had refused to surrender to the United States army forces and to be removed to Indian territory, remaining instead in the inaccessible swamps of southern Florida.

The Mikasuki are proud and reserved. They resent outsiders and make their antagonism very plain. Communication is limited, even with those who are considered friends. The trail camps are composed on the average of twelve houses and a community kitchen. Each camp is partially



*Chee kee* in Big Cypress Swamp (photo: Stiles, 1941)



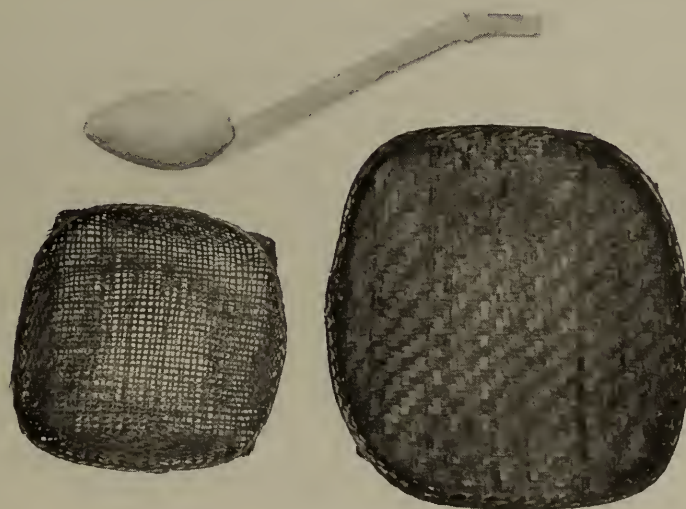
Camp on Tamiami Trail (photo: Stiles, 1939)

enclosed by a fence or stockade, and is inhabited by one family, related either by blood or marriage. A house, or *chee kee*, covers an area of approximately 18 by 12 feet. A cypress log frame about 8 feet high supports a peaked roof, thatched with palmetto, that rises to a height of 15 feet. Each house has a raised platform about 3 feet off the ground, covering the whole section under the roof or any part of it. It is used throughout the day for working or relaxing, particularly in wet weather. In many cases the men sleep on the platforms at night; the women and children may sleep there or on the ground, where they are protected from insects by mosquito netting nailed to a boxlike frame. Infants sleep in a hammock-like cradle strung between supporting posts, swayed by means of a rope.

In each camp there is one kitchen, built like a *chee kee* only higher, where the meals for the entire group are prepared by the women of the family. In it one can find the usual assortment of factory-made utensils, metal pots and pans, knives, forks, spoons, grills, etc., as well as the palmetto baskets and sifters of native manufacture. In the rafters under

the eaves are the buzzard-wing used to fan the fire and to keep smoke away from the cook, the wooden *sofkie* (stew) spoon carved of cypress which is passed from person to person at mealtime, and wooden stirring paddles. A hard cypress stump mortar and its pestle stand nearby. Pestles are about 5 feet long, and the grinding end, which is cylindrical, is 2 inches thick; the upper part is rectangular. The pestle is used to pound corn kernels to flour and to pulverize the coonti\* root.

\*Coonti is a wild plant (*Zamia integrifolia*) with a large bulbous root and fernlike foilage which grows profusely on high ground in the Everglades. The flour ground from the root has a high starch content and is often used in bread.



Above: Seminole kitchen utensils: spoon (2/5718); sifter at left (2/9316); and basket on the right (20/3608); 16 x 17 in. Right: Mandy Jumper pounding corn (photo: M. R. Harrington, 1908)



Although the Mikasuki do cultivate some small patches of corn and bananas nearby, their food comes mostly from noncultivated sources. Fish is important to their diet. Gar and a species of sunfish are plentiful, and the men are adept at spearing them. Meat from coon, deer, many small animals and birds, as well as alligator and bird eggs, are also on the menu. Bread, which appears to be a dough flattened into a large pancake and fried, is a tasteless and chewy product.

The fireplace is made of five or more logs — each about 10 feet long. They fan out like spokes from a hub, and the fire is built between the butts at the center. After a meal is cooked, the logs are pulled apart so that the fire will die out. The women and girls eat around this fire in the kitchen while the men and boys are served on the platform of the family dwelling.



Kitchen fire (photo: Stiles, 1939)



Three women (photo: Deaconess Harriet M. Bedell)

### *Clothing*

The women make their own clothing on hand sewing machines, a practice that began in the 1890s. They use good quality colorful cottons, silks, and rayons of commercial manufacture. The upper garment is a sleeveless cape that falls to the waist. It is made in three horizontally joined sections: the yoke is trimmed with a narrow band of ribbon; below it is a broader band about 18 inches wide, of a solid color or floral pattern; this, in turn, is trimmed with a 2-inch border, usually of a solid color. The lower garment is a very full skirt of colorful patchwork, the workmanship of which shows considerable skill, both in technique and design.

The women brush their hair over a crescent of stiff cardboard or a wire frame, similar to a baseball catcher's mask, fitting tightly on the head — when the hair is completely dressed it gives the appearance of a brim of a hat or sunbonnet. Older women and widows use no such frame and merely bunch their hair in a knot on top of the head or let it flow free.



Dr. Tiger (A-bi-agee) (photo: Stiles, 1939)

Many of the ornaments worn by the women are of native manufacture; discs and rectangular cutout plaques made of silver coins are attached to a chain and strung across the breast from shoulder to shoulder. Occasionally one or two are pinned to the cape. The older women sometimes use dome-shaped silver buttons with two perforations; they range in size from that of a 10-cent piece to that of a silver dollar or larger. These are sewn to a ribbon which in turn is sewn to the cape. Early forms of this ornament — made of Spanish gold or silver coins — are found on archeological sites. The women also wear finger rings, bracelets and earrings, some of which are of native manufacture, fashioned from silver coins. I collected one pair of breast ornaments made from aluminum saucepans. Some of the jewelry now consists of gold-plated earrings, imitation Navajo rings and bracelets which are purchased in stores. Each woman will wear some 20 strings of small pea-size glass beads about her neck; the strings are about 6 feet long when joined. Each string is a solid color, with red, black, orange, yellow, and white preferred. I have been informed that the importance of a woman in her community is judged by the quantity of beads she owns.

All children wear beads. Around their necks the youngest wear a single strand of white beads with a medicine packet attached; a single matching strand is tied around each wrist to ward off illness. Girls under twelve wear a few strands around their necks; these became their personal property at about the age of five.

The older men wear a knee-length one-piece dress of patchwork; it has a full-sleeved blousey button-front shirt which is attached to the skirt with a tight broad band at the waist. The younger men have discarded the dress for the patchwork blouse and trousers of commercial manufacture. The shirt is used as a pouch to carry small game and birds shot on the hunt. They wear their hair short and sometimes wear wide-brimmed black or tan felt hats.

A long solid-color cotton or rayon kerchief is knotted about the neck, or sometimes strung through a beaded or silver ring which forms an adjustable knot.

The men, women, and children do not wear shoes. Ornaments are not common among the men; some wear silver rings and/or bracelets, and although I was told some wear earrings, I did not observe any on my visit. Small children often go naked in fair weather, but they do wear garments in the same style as their parents' on some occasions.

### *Crafts*

There are two silversmiths in the group under discussion; John Mathla, son of the late Billy Mathla, and Jimmy Billy, who in the winter of

1939-1940 resided at John Osceola's camp on the Tamiami Trail. For reasons of his own the latter refused to do any work in silver during my stay. Breast ornaments, headdress ornaments, armbands and wristbands, bracelets, rings, and earrings are the usual pieces produced for home consumption. The men make wooden bowls, spoons, tool handles, model canoes, toy drums, bows and arrows, and small wooden human figures which they paint — all of which are produced for sale. The women make swamp-grass baskets, pincushions of basketry and palm fiber, palm-fiber dolls representing men and women dressed in native costume, loom-beaded charms, bracelets, necklaces, wire bead rings, and some patchwork aprons, etc., also for sale.

Crafts: *top*, dolls (22/4711-12); *center*, ring (15/2876), figures (24/7551-52); *bottom*, canoe (20/4088), 20 in. long.



Photo, 1910, by  
Alanson B. Skinner



### *Travel*

Travel is mostly on foot or by dugout hewn of a cypress log. The dugout is about 20 feet long with a 2-foot beam; it is constructed with a round bottom and has no keel projection. The round stern end, from which the craft is usually propelled, is sharply undercut to the waterline. The bow is abruptly pointed. The craft is propelled by poling from a standing position in the stern, a skill developed from early childhood (few but the Seminole can do it successfully). The pole is about 12 feet long and blunt on the poling end. The other end is tipped with an iron point, with or without barbs, and can be used so dextrously for spearing fish that the poling stroke is barely interrupted. When the family travels, their belongings are placed forward to amidships and the women and children sit on the bottom toward the stern. Some dugouts are equipped for sail.

### *Livelihood*

At present the men make a living by hunting and fishing, by acting as guides to hunters, selling peltry, gigging frogs for market, and, with the women, by making novelties for sale. For a fee, they also entertain the curious tourist with a tour through their camp. Entire families hire out to nearby farms as day laborers when work is available.



*Top: men's hand rattles (left, 2/5173; right, 20/1790); below: women's leg rattles made of turtle shells (2/4739); 15 x 13 in.*

### *Ceremonies*

One of my informants, Chief Cory Osceola, mentioned only one ceremony. This is the Green Corn Festival, held in a secret place some time in May or June. Marriages are consummated, names are given, puberty ceremonies held. There is also a ballgame between the boys and the girls and a purification ceremony for all the people. During the latter old clothing is discarded and new is put on. Each clan has its own counselors and fire, and the sacred medicine bundle is brought forth for all to view.

The rattle is the only musical instrument I have seen in use at these ceremonies, but the Mikasuki may also have a drum. There are two types of rattles, a hand rattle used by the men and a leg rattle used by the women. The men's rattle can be made of different materials — tortoise and coconut shells, or a baking soda can — with a stick handle. The women's rattle is laced to the leg and concealed under the skirt. It is made of a piece of buckskin or leather 18 by 20 inches onto which is attached several tortoise-shell rattles. This marks the rhythm for a dance.

At all important gatherings counselors, chiefs, and medicine men wear a multicolored turban decorated with a silver band, in which is secured an elaborate plume. A three-quarter-length coat of red cotton cloth over their dress and a pair of knee-length fringed buckskin leggings are also part of their attire, and sometimes a yarn-fringed beaded belt and sash.

In 1939, Dr. Tiger (Ab-i-agee), who resided at Concho Billy's camp, was the only medicine man I knew among these people. At the age of 87 years he was retired from active practice.

### *Death*

My informants say that when someone dies, their corpse lies in state on the platform of the *chee kee* and is surrounded with leaves. Afterward the



Costume for headmen at important gatherings: turban (20/4363); leather leggings (17/5936); beaded belt (1/8202); cloth coat (20/4884), 42 x 52 in.

remains are placed in a coffin which is taken to a secret place for burial. New utensils are put in the coffin for the afterworld, but not before they are killed (broken). In some cases the camp's inhabitants move to a new location.

Although the Mikasuki have never surrendered to the Government and wish to remain sovereign, with their own flag, recent observation between 1969 and 1973, indicates that civilization continues to make inroads on their life style. There has been a great influx of Northerners into the state, but very little concern for the desires of these people is evident. The federal government simply assumes its power and ignores the

fact that it is abridging Seminole rights by encroaching on what normally should be considered Indian land. Under this pressure a large percentage of the families have moved to the security of the Big Cypress Reservation in Hendry County and have become subservient to the Department of the Interior. Still another group are settled west of Miami along the Tamiami Trail and have had 333 acres set aside for them. They have occupied these lands for at least 50 years and their camps have been much in the same places as today.

However, approximately nine camps along the trail — lying between the 333 acres and Naples, Florida — are in a precarious position. Only the westernmost of these is relatively safe, as Chief Cory Osceola and his family own it by deed. Roughly eight camps are now in the Everglades National Park. The three that I regularly visit are well kept and improve the area. Their occupants are ambitious, healthy, self-sufficient and wish to be left alone. They seek nothing for themselves except what they are entitled to by treaty.

In 1972, after much harassment, Bobby Clay, headman of Royal Palm Hammock Camp, won a final court decision based on the precedent set in the case of the Amish people. The court affirmed that those Seminoles who so wish have the right to educate their children out of school and in their own way.

In 1968 the Government agreed on the extinguishing of land claims, but the proposal was never carried out. As always in Indian affairs, many questions are unanswered and the status of the proposed agreement is not clear.

The Seminoles are one of the few tribes that were never conquered by force of arms, and on this basis many lay claim to a position of sovereignty within the United States. It is imperative that the lands rightfully theirs, and which they presently inhabit and have inhabited for over 50 years, be secured for their use, so that the monsters of "progress and development" will not be allowed to swallow them up as has been done to most of the natural treasures of southern Florida.

May the Mikasuki be smiled on by their Maker and may we, the citizens of the United States — all foreigners — show some compassion toward these Native Americans in their fight for survival.



### NATHAN M. SHIPPEE

“We didn’t come over on the Mayflower. . . . We met it.”

Nathan M. Shippee, Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees, is an aware combination of Indian and Settler whose forebears were Penobscot Indians and descendants of both Roger Williams and John Robinson, the first minister in the new colonies.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1919, Mr. Shippee has always felt close to nature, and has identified himself in natural resources. In 1959, he founded a venture capital organization to finance the development of natural resources, which later become a public company listed on the American Stock Exchange as Prudential Funds, Inc. He was elected to the Board of Trustees of the Museum on February 19, 1970.

Inventor, author, philosopher, and businessman, Mr. Shippee’s first question on any subject is: “For what purpose?” His purpose in working as a Trustee of the Museum is not difficult to identify: “A recognition that no man is an island. We are all part of everything, as John Donne wrote. The bell tolls for me!”

## IT'S A SMALL WORLD

From the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego, Native Americans have long created a wide variety of works in miniature, some of which went on display at the Museum on May 15th.

Tiny baskets, carvings of stone, ivory, and metal, ceramics, and textiles all show great vitality, emotion, and technical skill. Some of these objects are small because the materials they are made of (such as jade, greenstone, or ivory) were in short supply, but most of them simply reflect man's continuing fascination for working with and handling tiny things.



Mask; TLINGIT; Alaska; 3½ x 6 in.

*It's a Small World* was organized by Dr. Frederick J. Dockstader, Susan Krause-Martin, and M. Marlene Martin. It will remain on view through September 30th. Exhibit Leaflet #4 provides more information about this display.



Carved antler; TLINGIT;  
Alaska;  $1\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{3}{4}$  in. *Below:*  
Baskets; POMO; California.



## WOUNDED KNEE: THEN AND NOW

In February, with the occupation of Wounded Knee, the Museum installed a special exhibition, *Wounded Knee: Then and Now*, and published Exhibit Leaflet #3 on the subject. The purpose was to inform the visitor and to give him the opportunity to learn something about the original Wounded Knee massacre and the events leading up to the takeover. Contemporary photographs (then and now) were part of the display, as well as an extensive commentary.

*Wounded Knee: Then and Now* attracted considerable attention and visitors welcomed the opportunity to develop a better understanding of the complexities of the situation.

The exhibition was dismantled when the occupation ended.

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

The regular Annual Meeting of the Board of Trustees was held on May 1st, at the Museum. At that time, in keeping with the requirements of the by-laws, the officers of the Board are elected; the present slate was continued in office, as listed on the inside cover of *Indian Notes*. Among other matters of business, it was decided to publish the *Annual Report*, to be printed and distributed to the membership of the Museum later this year.

## EXPLORING THE ENIGMATIC TRI-POINT

Michael Sellon

Research Associate

### *Introduction*

Within the broad range of Amerindian archeological and ethnographic material, one encounters a variety of objects which can only be described as enigmatic. A number of artifacts remain obscure as to origin, use, and meaning. Particularly in the latter contexts — those of use and meaning — there exists a multi-dimensional landscape of possible inquiry: the practical and the ceremonial each claim their own realm, but groups of artifacts tend to be at one or the other end of the spectrum, from the basic functions of tool and weapon, on the one hand, to the strictly non-utilitarian sacred and ceremonial, on the other. It is, of course, the material that is associated with the ceremonial aspect of Amerindian life that is most enigmatic. And it is this very mystery which encourages us to draw on our own perceptual and imaginative resources. For the student of culture history, there are a number of horizons which invite exploration, challenging us to call upon all our resources in order to approach more closely those determining factors which helped to bring these materials into existence.

As a foreword, it might be useful to mention that this article is divided generally into two sections. The intent is to offer in Part I a synthesized survey of the major structural types of tri-points in the Museum collections, embracing the range of their variations and development. It is hoped that the reader's confrontation with this object will be as fresh an experience as when this very material was brought to light by plow or archeologist's trowel. Part II will focus on historical considerations and outline other researches into the tri-point that cover a range of interpretations — some highly speculative, some firmly grounded. Finally, the author hopes the reader may respond with his own reflections and intuitions, so that these may be brought to bear on the mystery of the tri-point.

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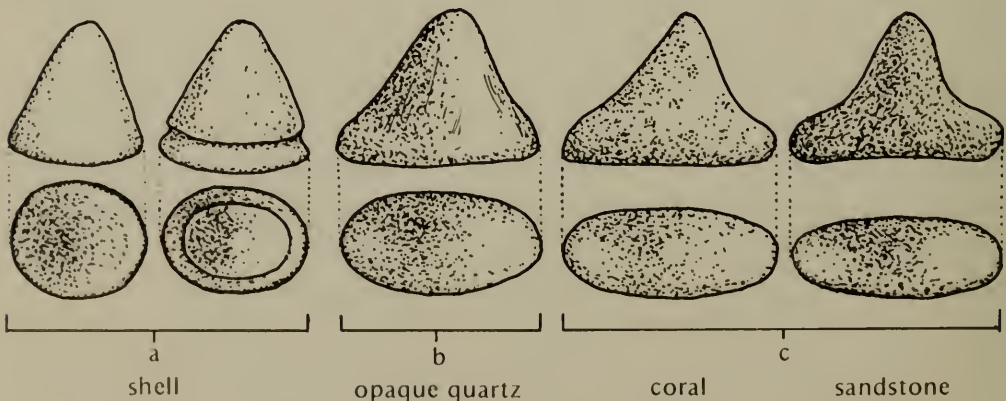
Photos and drawings by the author unless otherwise indicated

## PART I

Within the time-span of the first century A.D., an Arawak-speaking people began a long sea migration, leading north from the coast of Venezuela, over the steppingstones of the Lesser Antilles to the fertile expanses of the Greater Antillean islands: Puerto Rico, Hispañola, Jamaica, and Cuba. The voyage took many centuries to complete, and during that period, definitive changes took place in the patterns of life once practiced on the mainland. With these changes, there arose new mythologies and sacred objects. The conception has been fairly well validated that, in mid-journey through the Lesser Antilles, the tri-point came into existence as a venerated object. The inspiration for this development — the image source from which it was synthesized — is still subject to speculation. It has been determined from archeological evidence, however, that the majority of these early prototypes retained for a considerable period a characteristically small and simple form, unadorned by any incised lines or sculpted figures. The variety of examples from such islands as Antigua, Guadeloupe, and the Virgin Islands indicates the formation of a standard for tri-point manufacture, a religio-esthetic rule, which was maintained for centuries of individual reproduction.

Let us now look at certain fundamental characteristics of these early prototype tri-points:

[1]

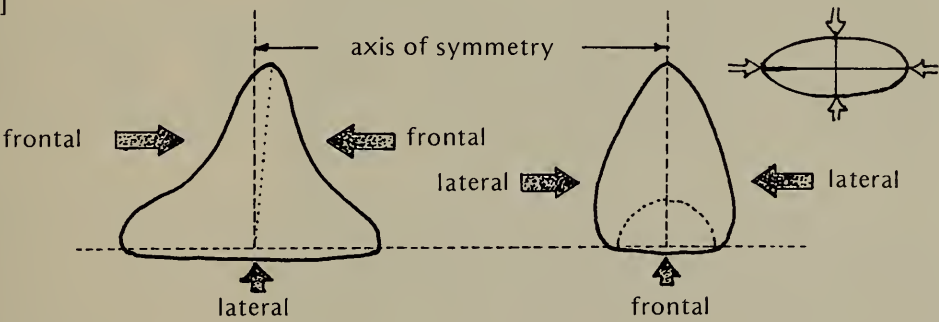


The morphological sequence illustrated [1] describes some basic variations that occur, suggesting a development from an almost purely geometric conoid form (a), to a somewhat elongated base (b), to a conoid with definitive basal feet (c). The examples (b) and (c) most resemble the

dominant form used in the succeeding generations of tri-points, as we will see later.

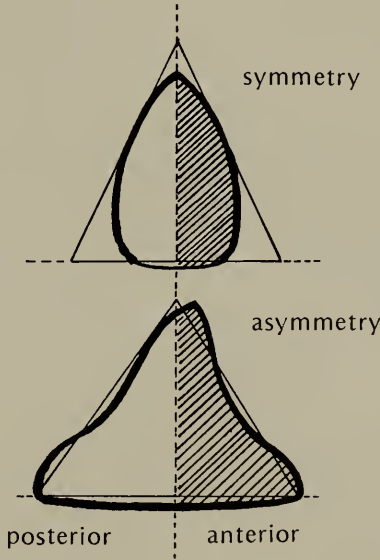
Another remarkable “rule of design” eventually emerged in the primal form of the tri-point. It is difficult to determine at what stage of development a conscious awareness of design intent was established concerning the two basic profiles of the form: the frontal and lateral views [2].

[2]



Sighting the tri-point from either *frontal* position, we discern in a majority of cases, a *symmetrical* profile:

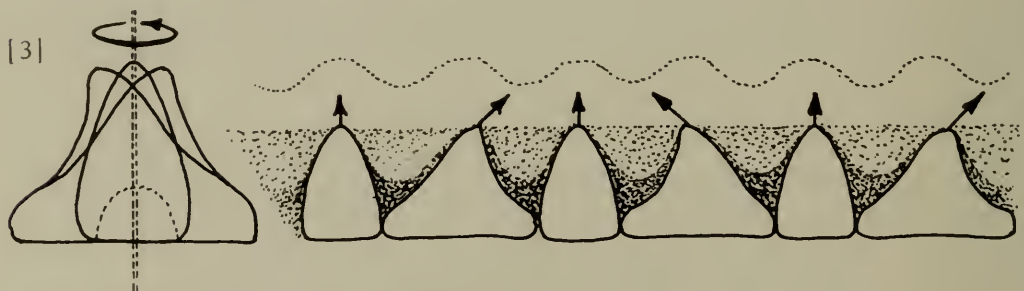
Sighting the tri-point from either *lateral* position, we discern an *asymmetrical* profile, a “leaning” to one side, one might say



The basal point toward which the conoid point leans has been designated the “anterior” point. According to Fewkes:

It will be found that its apex, except in rare cases, tips slightly towards the *anterior* point. The anterior projection in some instances is modified into a head, but in a type from which this head is absent, the conoid projection still tips somewhat towards one point, which on that account, may be called the anterior projection [Fewkes 1907, p. 111].

This design element, as already mentioned, had at the time of the Taíno become an intentional practice. Thus a highly suggestive feature is revealed – a relationship of symmetry and asymmetry, which, when we rotate the tri-point, creates a rhythmic pulse [3].

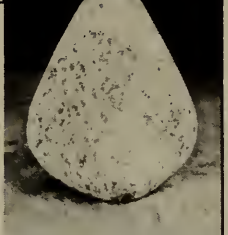













The settlement of the Arawak on the Antillean islands of Puerto Rico and Hispanola brought about certain cultural transformations. In the period 800 to 1000 A.D., as revealed by a variety of archeological evidence, marked changes took place in ceramic design and decoration. The emergence of this distinct impetus, although retaining a predominantly Arawakan character, coincided with the generation of the Taino culture, which lasted some five to six centuries until that day when three Spanish vessels were sighted on the horizon. This cultural flourishing owed much to geographical isolation and fertile land, particularly in what is now called the Dominican Republic. The tri-point continuously held an important position in the sacred paraphernalia of priest and layman: the impact of change, however, worked its effect on tri-point design, and soon certain articulations and animations appeared on its surfaces.

The photo images shown on page 55 present a suggestive morphological sequence, selected according to the degree of sculpted transformation. It is important to note that this sequence may or may not correspond to the actual historical evolution of the tri-point, as the chronology of these mutations remains to be determined. But let us pause and observe, again with the freshness of a first encounter, how these increasingly enigmatic features of primal tri-point form unfold.

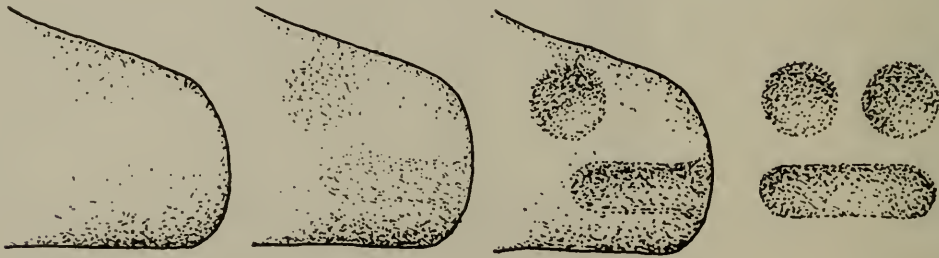
This sequence of examples, all from the Museum collection, are divided into type series, somewhat in accord with other suggested typologies [Fewkes, 1907; de Hostos, 1923] for these tri-point variants.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 (page 55) illustrate finely worked examples of Type I, which we have described as the primal form. The three together comprise a sequence with progressively greater emphasis on the asymmetrical gesture of the conoid, as well as on the arcing base.

TYPE I		
<p>FIGURE 1</p> <p><i>Origin:</i> Puerto Rico 15/9383</p>		
<p>FIGURE 2</p> <p><i>Origin:</i> Dominican Republic 5/9290</p>		
<p>FIGURE 3</p> <p><i>Origin:</i> Dominican Republic 3/3940</p>		
TYPE II		
<p>FIGURE 4</p> <p><i>Origin:</i> Puerto Rico 15/9385</p>		
<p>FIGURE 5</p> <p><i>Origin:</i> Dominican Republic 15/9378</p>		
<p>FIGURE 6</p> <p><i>Origin:</i> Dominican Republic 3/3941</p>		

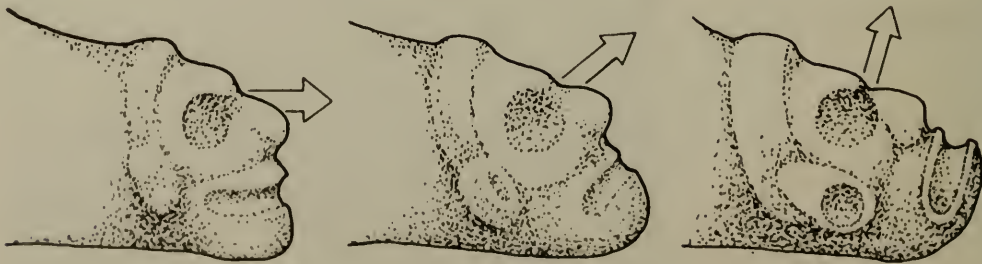
The sequence of illustrations [4] present a schematic animation of the basal point (typically anterior), wherein the Tainan sculptor fashioned pits and grooves over the surface to achieve zoomorphic and anthropomorphic transformations. Simple means were used to vitalize the form, essentially indentations which resulted in eyes and mouth:

[4]



Figures 4, 5, and 6 (page 55) illustrate Type II, here also arranged in sequence with progressively greater detail. Figure 4 offers only the most subtle detail in the animation of the anterior point; Figure 5 presents a well-sculpted aviform head and an exquisite overall finish. This example represents a whole subdivision of Type II that developed the anterior point into a zoomorphic image, with the greater majority representing reptiles or occasionally birds. A second subdivision of Type II tri-points (Figure 6), shows the anterior point graphically transformed into anthropomorphic features with several “gazes,” or directions toward which the face presents itself [5].

[5]



# TYPE III

FIGURE 7

*Origin:*  
Puerto Rico  
18/4997



FIGURE 8

*Origin:*  
Puerto Rico  
3696



FIGURE 9

*Origin:*  
Puerto Rico  
4059



FIGURE 10

*Origin:*  
Dominican Republic  
3/3942



# TYPE IV

FIGURE 11

*Origin:*  
Dominican Republic  
5/3754



FIGURE 14—*Origin:* Puerto Rico 3/1977

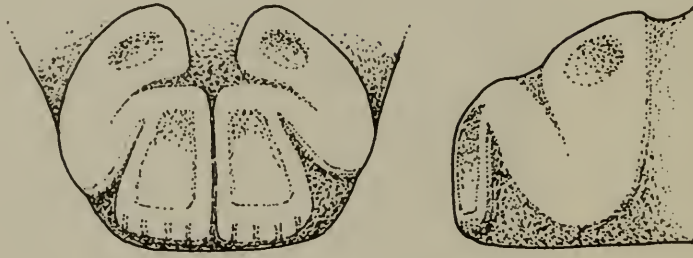


FIGURE 15—*Origin:* Puerto Rico 15/9382



The posterior points of Type II tri-points are very simply sculpted, often representing a pair of limbs in a squatting or kneeling position [6].

[6]

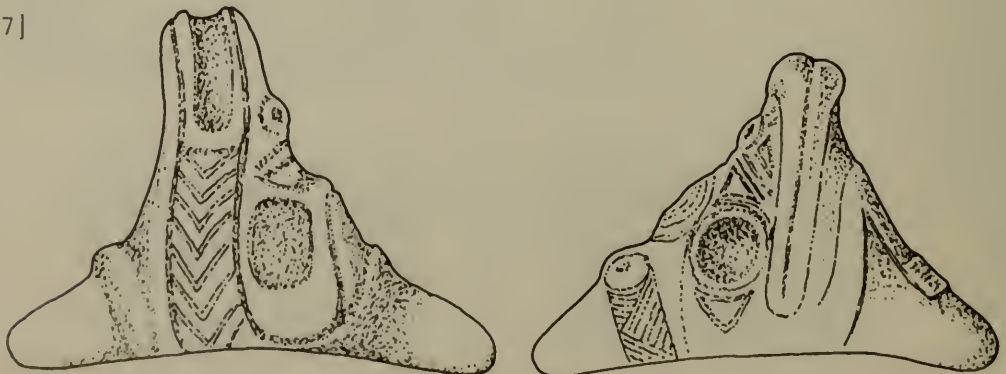


Continuing with the tri-point spectrum, in Type III examples (page 57), represented by Figures 7-10, another radical shift of transformation occurs. Now the Tainan sculptor has begun to animate the conoid surface, first tentatively, as in Figure 7, and then more boldly in Figure 8 (worn by erosion), and exquisitely in Figure 9. Here the tri-point depicts some of the strongest faces in Tainan imagery. Note also that, except for the final Type III example, the anterior-posterior points return to the primal unsculpted state, as well as maintaining the close relationship to the primal Type I form. The exception to this is the elaborate example shown in Figure 10, with multi-facial transformation incorporating both Type II and Type III styles.

Type IV tri-points are illustrated by Figures 11-13 with the inclusion of two examples not in the Museum collection [Fewkes 1907, PI. XLVIII and XLIX] which complete the sequence. Figure 11 would seem to be a Type I profile, and yet two large eyes on the posterior side of the conoid and a large mouth on the opposite anterior side are revealed — in effect, the conoid point has now become an immense nose of some mythic creature. In all Type IV mutations, the face-animation of the tri-point embraces the *whole* form, with its gaze, relatively speaking, toward the sky.

Two examples of further development of Type IV characteristics are illustrated in [7]:

[7]



These examples represent the culminative mutations of the primal tri-point form. They maintain a remarkable affinity to its basic character while at the same time elaborating the whole form. The dynamic thrust of the reptilean face transfigures the conoid while at the same time the asymmetric gesture is dramatically emphasized. Here, figure and ground have found an integrative balance.

Figures 14 and 15 are included in this series even though many students might object. Most frequently, these have been classified as pertaining to a whole group of artifacts called "masks." Yet to a great degree these images do not violate the fundamental characteristics of the tri-point, and, when juxtaposed with the foregoing Figures 11-13, their inclusion seems all the more logical. For now, these can be said to fall somewhere between the tri-point and the stone masks.

These final illustrations mark the completion of this study of the fundamental tri-point forms in the Museum's collection, and, as indicated, what may well have been the culminative transformations before the culture was overrun. It is suggested here that the reader review his *own* perspective of the tri-point figure, taking note of any personal impressions that may have emerged so far during this reading.

## PART II

Let us now consider the reflections of certain students of the Tainan culture, some of whom have contributed greatly toward unlocking the mysteries of the tri-point. These suggestions, however, can be regarded as *beginnings*, since a great many questions are still unanswered.

The first people of European origin to meet the Taíno were the Spanish, under the leadership of Christopher Columbus in 1492. However, the respect he wished to see practiced by his men, as well as by later arrivals, did not occur, and the fate of the Taíno is now well recorded in the annals of cultural annihilation. Before that tragic end took place, however, Bartolomé Columbus, brother of Christopher, commissioned a studious friar, Ramón Pane, to make a record of the Tainan way of life. The resulting document is considered the first anthropological treatise on the New World. Within its pages there is a brief mention, "certain *zemis* [idols] have three points and they [the Taínos] believe that they make the *yuca* [cassava] to thrive [Bourne 1905-06, p. 331]."

This account by Pane has served as the prime interpretative source for succeeding students of the tri-point figure. It states that the three-pointed stone is one member of a whole class of idols which are given the generic term *zemi*, which have certain animistic power in the cultivation of manioc, *i.e.*, fertility, fecundation. Even though this account of Pane's is

of considerable value in deciphering the role of the tri-point in Tainan culture, he failed to elaborate its actual use in ceremony, its aboriginal name and origin, and to explain the many variations we recognize. It is an added misfortune that other investigations and reports by contemporary Spanish chronologists did not unearth more information about the tri-point, even though such information was then readily available. Even the remarkable *Historia de las Indias* by Bartolomé de las Casas provides no further insights into this question.

The void left by the deficiency of the Spanish records has invited many speculations and intuitive impressions — some well grounded, others only flashes of insight. Let us now consider the testimony offered by several astute interpreters of Tainan history, to strengthen our developing perspective.

A prominent investigator in this field is Adolfo de Hostos, who was deeply interested in synthesizing what he termed “a biological scheme of morphological development” to be applied to the various transformations of the tri-point, and offers some confirmation to the sequence synthesized from the Museum collection.

He suggests that the variant forms of the tri-point were related to the generation of different kinds of plants, and consequently, to different ceremonial use of the *zemi*. Such root crops as *yuca* and *yautia*, both important staple crops, may have been associated with a specific animistic character, later transposed into the tri-pointed figure.

One theory as to the source of the prototype form is considered by de Hostos: the sprouting tip of the *yautia* tuber is conoid in form, and thus it may have served as “an objective representation of vegetable growth. [de Hostos 1923].”

[8]



*yautia* tuber  
sprouting tip  
suggestive  
relationship  
between the  
*yautia* sprout  
and the tri-point

This sprouting tip, or “eye,” is the germinating point of new growth and future harvest. The choice of “good eyes for seeding,” with the intent of a good harvest, fired in the Tainan mind a vital image. De Hostos continues: “The conoid (of the tri-point) was made to symbolize the

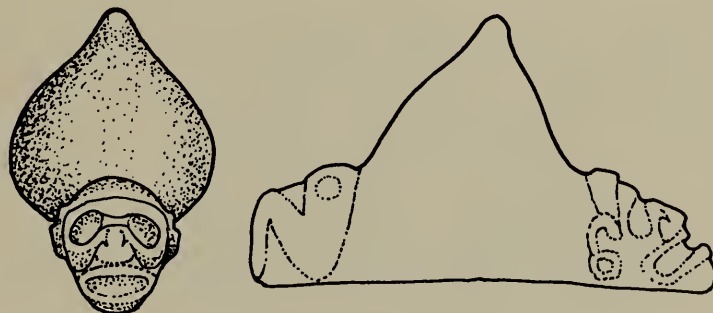
invisible power of germination which they knew to reside within the bud.”

In the context of contemporary understanding of primitive idolatry, it is felt that symbolic forms of this sort were considered by their makers not only to *represent* (*i.e.*, mediate) forces of spirits, but also to *embody* them. That is, the idol itself maintained what de Hostos called “an existence of vital motion from inside outwards.”

In a final contribution, de Hostos shares a common notion that these idols were buried within the Tainan garden plots or *conucos*, especially when the first seedlings were taking hold and when the ritual influence of the tri-point was most needed.

These interpretative offerings have created a general image associated with plant fertility and possible use of the tri-point in rituals for good harvest. Perhaps coinciding with this general concept, and contributing to it, is the view of the tri-point as a mammiform and the fertility associated with that image. This interpretation of the source of the figure has many advocates; yet, as we shall consider later, such simplistic notions can be limiting.

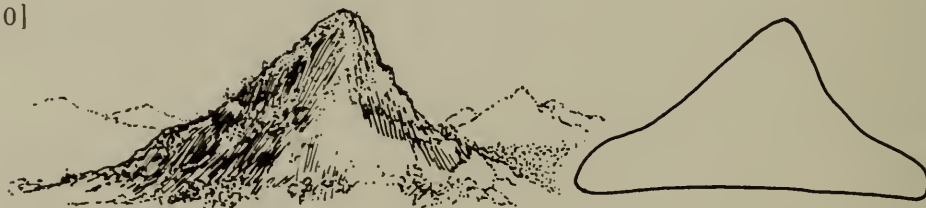
[9]



Sven Lovén, another prominent student of the Tainan culture, offers an examination quite similar to that of de Hostos, while taking the view that the tri-point is a geometric abstraction. He considers the conoid projection as a geometric symbol/configuration — a synthesis of vegetable growth. When this symbol form was placed in the ground, “the vegetable in question would thereby receive aid to germinate [Lovén 1935].” This expression conveys again the animistic content the tri-point may have embodied for the Taínos. The emphasis upon describing the conoid projection (a decidedly mathematical expression) as a kind of geometric archetype frees the interpretation from being tied to singular notions of origin and usage. The report by Ramón Pane and other accounts leave the impression that the ceremonial applications of the tri-point may well have extended into other areas of growth and generation, *i.e.*, childbirth, seasonal changes, need for rain, etc.

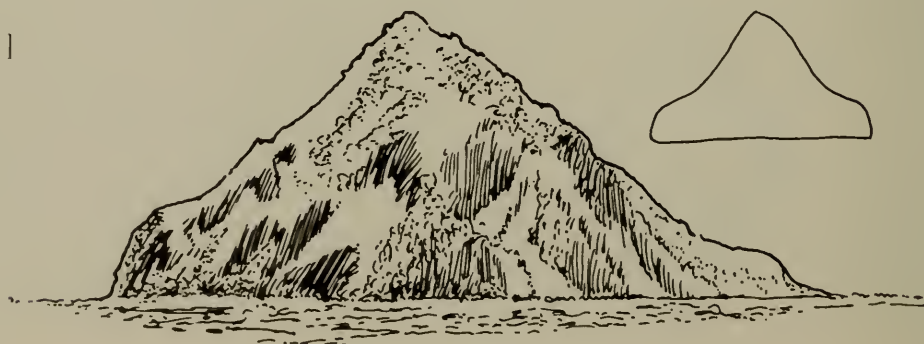
Let us consider other impressions, and thereby enlarge the palette of possible interpretations. A suggestion offered by many people who have lived or traveled in the Caribbean takes into account certain graphic similarities between the tri-point and the mountains that give dynamic profile to the islands. Sometimes called “the God of the Mountain,” the tri-point projects a figure that admittedly conveys a mountain-like asymmetry [10].

[10]



Most impressive in this context is the geography of the Lesser Antilles, where sometimes a single mountain embodies a whole island [11]:

[11]

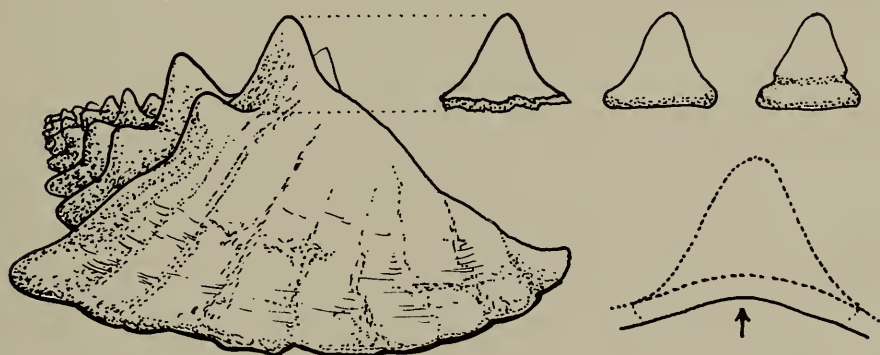


Diamond Islet, north of Granada

This thesis is definitively supported by a noted contemporary investigator of Arawakan culture development. Through extensive studies of the Lesser Antilles, Fred Olsen has imaginatively theorized how the confrontation of the mainland Arawak with the Antillean isles fomented the creation of the tri-point [Olsen 1970]. Of particular importance were the impressive volcanoes, rising majestically from the sea, whose dynamic cones sent forth a periodic fury of fire and smoke. This image, argues Olsen, may well have integrated with an already existing concept of deity. Perhaps the Taínos envisioned this deity as their guide in the exodus from the mainland. Coupled with the impressive images of their new home, this may have given rise to the need to give visual form to that deity.

Olsen also offers the theory that the first prototype tri-points were found naturally, in the form of the conical protuberances displayed by large conch shells. The empty shells, cast up onto the shore, may well have impressed the Arawak with the similarity between the conch spines and the volcanic peaks, and in order to isolate that image, “the Arawak shaman had cut the knob of the conch so that it could stand on its own base and serve as the image of the volcano [Olsen 1970].”

[12]



Of special interest in this context is the fact that these conch-shell prototypes had, by the nature of the shell wall, a concave base. As already observed, this is a characteristic feature through most of the spectrum of tri-point development.

There is another possible alternative to this latter view: namely the natural passage of the conch shell on to the shore, there to be fragmented by the action of wave against rock. Just as ceramic handles of pottery vessels often remain intact while the rest of the clay body fragments, so may have been the fate of the conch projections. Afterwards, the effect of water and sand may have polished off all ragged edges, leaving a naturally smooth conoid form to serve as model for the creation of tri-point *zemis*.

An even further application of this characteristic concave feature has been made by Fewkes [1907, p. 125]. He links it to the massive stone “collar” of Tainan manufacture and suggests that the tri-point might have been lashed to the collar’s curved surface. This theory and the whole topic of the stone collars is subject enough for another article and thus will not be pursued here.

These are a few of the existing attempts to unlock the mysteries of the tri-point. These interpretations should, however, mark only the *beginning* of this exploration. Without doubt, especially in reviewing the complexity of tri-point forms, there remains an outstanding challenge to explore more

deeply into their enigmatic and fascinating nature. We must take into account the impressive durability of this image, through centuries of development and refinement. Such continuity of interest indicates no superficial involvement on the part of the Arawak. Ultimately the tri-point needs to be considered in the context of the whole Arawakan culture, both in the abundant material remains that can serve a deepening inquiry, as well as in the brief but stimulating historical accounts transcribed by the Spanish. The open-ended nature of such an inquiry sets broad frontiers for exploration and discovery.

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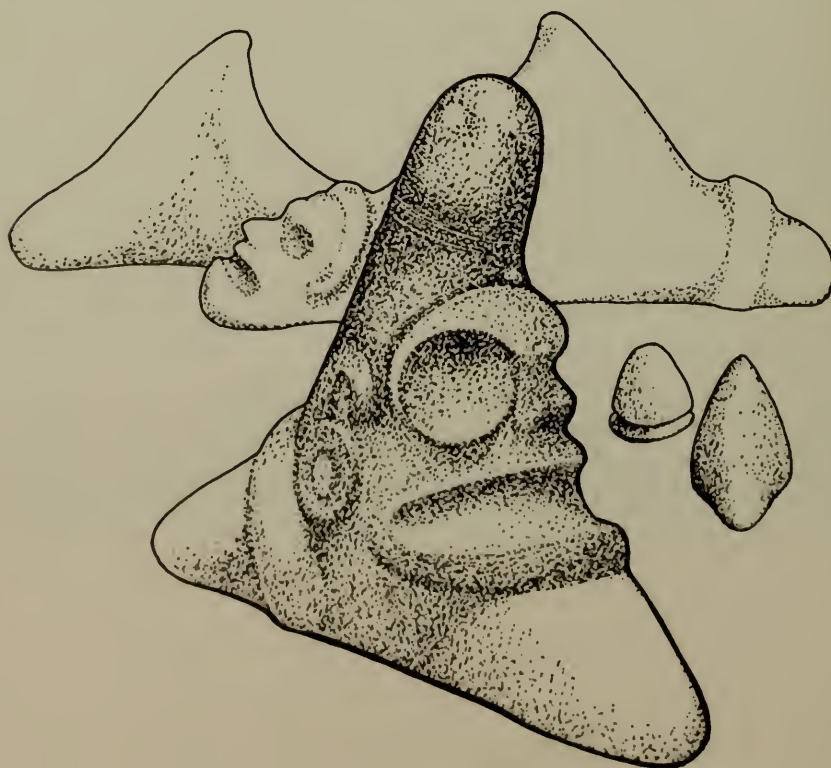
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